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Murder on the Orient Express, A literary and train journey from Istanbul to Europe

Abstract

Murder on the Orient Express (1934), the famous novel by Agatha Christie, takes place between two spaces and combines two opposing forces: Europe with its homeward pull, and a hazy Orient, its vector Istanbul, the vanishing point as if travelling backwards. The story starts in Syria and finishes in Yugoslavia, covering a period of four days, passing through towns, stations, mountains, straits, frontiers, regions, countries and even continents, between Aleppo and Vincovci. The explicit area of reference is vast, but this is implicit; *Murder on the Orient Express* could have been a travel novel, but the journey is not geographically conventional.

The route is from Istanbul towards Europe. However, between the starting point of this enclosed-setting journey and the destination there is a hazy *somewhere*. The mythical train, streaking across the unfolding landscape, stops, frozen in time and space. Here, somewhere that is precisely nowhere, on the borders of the Orient and Europe, within the confined space of the train, the vendetta and the journey come together. We know that time never stops; we know less that neither does space. The immobilization of the Orient Express provides the literary possibility of simulating these joint impossibilities.

MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS, A LITERARY AND TRAIN JOURNEY FROM ISTANBUL TO EUROPE

ANNA MADOEUF

"If you want to express
That kind of gloom
You feel alone in a double room […]
Waiting at the Station
For a near relation
Puff, Puff, Puff, Puff
The Istanbul Train…."
Graham Greene, *Orient-Express*, 1979, p. 285 (cabaret song).

The title and setting of *Murder on the Orient Express*, one of Agatha Christie's best-known detective novels, published in 1934, are taken from this emblematic train[1]. The best-selling novel is both inspired by and part of the myth, contributing to the fantasy about the king of trains, the train of kings[2]. Many international celebrities have travelled on it, including the Emperor Haile Selassie, Josephine Baker, Leopold II, Mata Hari, Isadora Duncan, Lawrence of Arabia, Agatha Christie herself, and… James Bond[3]. The Orient Express, "the Maltese Falcon of international express trains"[4], is without doubt the train that has been the source of the greatest literary inspiration, for example in the work of Joseph Kessel, Paul Morand,

[1] Quotations from the book are taken from the edition published by Fontana 1959 (16th impression, 1976).

[2] A film of the novel was made by Sidney Lumet in 1974, with an all-star cast. More recently, a number of Agatha Christie's novels have been produced as comic-strip books, including *Le Crime de l'Orient-Express,* by François Rivière and Solidor, published by Emmanuel Proust in 2003. There is also a video game named after the train and which uses its décor as a setting.

[3] In the film *From Russia with Love* (1963), based on the novel by Ian Fleming (1957).

[4] As described by Douglas Kennedy, 1988, *Beyond the Pyramids*.

Colette, Graham Greene, Vladimir Nabokov, John Dos Passos, and Ernest Hemingway. In fact, the story of the Orient Express began at its inauguration, with the journalist Edmond About's account of the epic initial journey on 4th October 1883, when it steamed out of the Gare de l'Est (known at the time as the Gare de Strasbourg) in Paris to the sound of Mozart's Turkish March, for a journey of approximately 80 hours and 3200 kilometres[5]. From its creation to the present day, it has been the setting and source of endless stories, from journalistic accounts to novels, from history to fiction, with themes of adventure, luxury, politics, dreams, exoticism, travel, or nostalgia for times past[6].

The saga of the Orient Express, from the end of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th century, is one of fantastic and epic episodes, of minor events and moments of history. Passing through a number of unstable areas and time zones, the line and the train have been affected on many occasions by geopolitical upheavals[7]. The emblematic Orient Express, linking West and East, Europe and its borders, is a line drawn between two worlds. However, it is generally represented as travelling in a single direction – towards Constantinople, its *outward* destination. While the arrival of the railway undoubtedly changed the shape of the world in general, the Orient Express also helped shape the way the world is perceived by the West, pushing back or blurring the borders of Europe and the exotic East. Of course, "when we take the train, it's to go from one town to another" (Pérec 1974, 85), but taking the Orient Express was to go from a city in Europe to the target city of Stamboul. The Orient Express formalized the direction from Europe, perceived as the point of departure, the beginning, the centre of the world, an autonomous universe, to Stamboul, which was not only the terminus of the train but also the threshold of another world. The train also changed both the image and the

[5] The Orient Express was the brainchild of a Belgian businessman, Georges Nagelmackers, who founded the *Compagnie Internationale des Wagons Lits et des Grands Express Européens* in 1884. The train was then called the *Express d'Orient* and was renamed the Orient Express in 1891.

[6] As still shown today by the success of the exhibition "Il était une fois l'Orient-Express" at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris (April – August 2014).

[7] It was in one of the train's carriages that both the armistice of 11th November 1918 and the capitulation of France on 22nd June 1940 were signed. The route has varied considerably, from the initial route through Strasbourg, Munich, Vienna, Budapest, Bucarest and Varna (crossing the Black Sea), to the most southerly route (following the opening of the Simplon tunnel) taken by the train on which Hercule Poirot travelled (Belgrade, Trieste, Venice, Milan, Lausanne, Paris Gare de Lyon).

geography of Stamboul-Constantinople, henceforward a city at the edge of Europe, the horizon of the Orient, a disembarkation point for travellers who suddenly arrived in the city in large numbers. For example, Pierre Loti, in 1890, deplored the new influx in Stamboul of European tourists, "disgorged by the Orient Express"[8]. Associated with the train, luxurious hotels were built in the host cities, such as the mythical Pera Palace of Tepebasi in Constantinople, built in 1892 and inaugurated with great pomp by a grand ball in 1895. Finally, the very name of the train combines two apparently incompatible words, given that the Orient seemed to be a different world, subject to and associated with an idea of a specific time. It is maybe for this reason that the Orient Express is described as the train that "makes haste slowly". Above all, is the Orient Express not a mystification, a terminological imposture? The train will never keep its promises, being neither express nor doing more than brush the Orient.

The train journey predicted by Agatha Christie's novel takes connects Istanbul to Europe. However, between the city that triggers that fictional in camera and the place of destination, a blurred somewhere, shrouded in snow, will appear, in the Far East. The mythical train that moves along unfolding landscapes and places will suddenly stop. In the confined and tubular space of the Orient-Express, that sudden stop will expedite the crime promised in the title.

The plot of *Murder on the Orient Express* may be original, but the singularity of this narrative lies somewhere else, in the mechanisms of the staging of space, time and the illusion of movement.

My aim is thus to draw a parallel between that geo-literary mechanism end the creations of the Alexander Calder, carver (1898-1976) that were instigated and animated by that triptych (space/time/movement). Calder did indeed create constructions that were said to be mobile for some of them (as they were suspended in the air), and stabile for others (as if they were suspended on the ground), or even mobile and stabile at the same time (hybrid shapes).The stabile can only be imagined as a follow-up of the mobile, being in a way its antonym. The latter only exists through its instability, whereas the stabile ossifies in its own object a denial of fixity. Between the two possible shapes, all the asymmetrical tones of an unbalanced balance, and vice versa can be observed, from the most constructed to the most unstructured. These objects, mobile and stabile, also denote an obsession with time, in the questions it raises, in its manifestations, expressed in his way by Calder, the artist who "carves

[8] Pierre Loti, *Fantôme d'Orient*, p. 57.

times", as Jacques Prévert said, (1971, 3). The movement of these constructions is time, whose energy is created by mobility, whose evolution is composed of the interaction of stable and mobile things. This essay will hence make use of the qualities of these artefacts to imagine the action mechanisms, the places and the landscapes of *Murder on the Orient Express* as determining and interpretative configurations of spatial situations. For that aim, we need to travel back to the beginning of the 1930s, have a seat in that fictional train leaving from Stamboul and going to the suspense of the criminal plot imagined by Agatha Christie.

1. "Constantinople – Trieste – Calais"

In contrast to the pattern mentioned above, Agatha Christie's novel[9] is oriented and functions in the reverse direction, towards Europe, in other words it takes place on the homeward journey as the travellers set off from Stamboul[10]. The boarding point is the station of Sirkeci; the coaches are attached, the characters board, the train and the plot set off in unison. The construction and the plot are classic, based around a small self-centred and exclusive world (a group of westerners), confined and transported across a vast area, the ideal enclosed setting. It comes as no surprise that there are no Turks in *Murder on the Orient Express*, just as there are no Egyptians in *Death on the Nile*, another enclosed-setting mystery by Agatha Christie involving an exotic journey, this time involving a river cruise[11]. Setting the

[9] Agatha Christie (1890-1976) travelled to Baghdad in 1928; returning from Nineveh in 1931, she took the Simplon Orient Express in the other direction and was delayed by problems caused by bad weather. She used this experience and an episode in January 1929 when the train was snowed up in eastern Thrace for four days. The plot was based on elements of the sensational Lindbergh affair (the kidnapping and murder of the son of the famous American aviator in 1932), as the victim of the *Murder on the Orient Express*, Samuel Edward Ratchett *alias* Cassetti, had murdered a child.

[10] In the novel, the city is called either Stamboul (name of the old town of the historic peninsula) or Constantinople, a name that was no longer used after 1926, when the name Istanbul was imposed by the Turkish authorities but never in fact adopted by Agatha Christie.

[11] Agatha Christie married the archeaologist Max Mallowan in 1930, and subsequently, several of her most famous novels were set in the East, where she spent long periods. After *Murder on the Orient Express*, Hercule Poirot figured in other oriental mysteries: *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1936) set in Tell Yarimjah (Iraq), *Death on the Nile* (1937) in Upper Egypt, and *Appointment with Death*

intrigue in a train does away with the need for natives; the characters can picture themselves and talk about themselves, highlighted against the foreign surroundings and amongst people who are different from them and who become mere shadowy figures. On the other hand, the foreign lands provide the perfect foil for the western characters and the scenes and intrigues in which they are involved. In the Orient, even if here it is subliminal and only hinted at, the imported/transposed characters stand out sharply, like transfers placed on a pre-drawn background. There are neither Orientals nor the Orient; both can be dispensed with, because the Orient Express itself conjures up the myth of the Orient, whose representation reached its zenith in the 1930s or was at least sufficiently eloquent to be able to do without its subject matter.

The detective Hercule Poirot boards the Simplon Orient Express bound for Europe, a 3,000-kilometre journey lasting three days, in a carriage bearing a plate indicating the destinations "Constantinople – Trieste – Calais"[12]. From then on, the plot takes place in a closed setting, and the train functions as a net ensnaring the characters, who are of different nationalities, social classes, places of residence, ages and fortunes. This multiplicity of identities is plausible in a train, but in the novel, the characters were all connected in some way, and, unbeknown to Hercule Poirot, they already knew each other.

The train envelops the passengers/characters, detaching them from the outside world, its torments and storms; the train is the only place, an absolute, a world in itself. At the same time, the train, together with its coaches, compartments, restaurant, staff (subsidiary characters there to serve the travellers), way of life, conventions and protocol, all retain strong references to social class and identity; rather than being held in abeyance, this aspect is highlighted and rendered almost mechanistic by the confined space and the inherent cramped conditions and lack of privacy.

(1938) between Jerusalem and Petra. *They came to Baghdad* (1952), published after the war, whose heroine is a young woman from London, is a spy story set in Baghdad.

[12] The Simplon tunnel in Switzerland was built in 1906. After the First World War, the train was called the Simplon-Orient-Express, and its new route was London - Calais (or Boulogne) - Paris - Vallorbe - Lausanne - Simplon - Milan - Venice - Trieste – Zagreb. At Vinkovci, there were two alternative routes: Bucarest-Constanza-Odessa and Belgrade-Constantinople-Athens.

2. From station to station; an abstract, fleeting landscape

Like the dividing of the Red Sea as the Hebrews crossed over, the landscape appears and disappears hypnotically and majestically, simultaneously emerging and dividing on either side of the train that confronts, strikes and flees it in a single movement. Here, the unfolding landscape, composed of two asymmetrical and yet perfectly parallel horizons, is singularly devoid of depth of political or social meaning. It is detached, an absolute, simultaneously created and erased by the train along a given stretch of the track. However, it creates an atmosphere; landscape and time go by, images and moments linked in a perpetual fleeing procession. It is the stations that punctuate the stages of the journey, and also where the shuffling ballets and codified rituals of boarding and alighting occur, but they are not treated as features of the modernity of the time, obligatory thresholds of passage and arrival, but rather as non-places breaking the journey. Aleppo station, for example, is described as follows: "Nothing to see, of course. Just a long, poor-lighted platform with loud furious altercations in Arabic going on somewhere."[13] (p. 9). Belgrade is dismissed in a similarly terse manner:

> The Simplon Orient Express arrived at Belgrade at a quarter to nine that evening. It was not due to depart again until 9.15, so Poirot descended to the platform. He did not, however, remain there long. The cold was bitter and though the platform itself was protected, heavy snow was falling outside. He returned to his compartment. (p. 27)

The two platforms, symbols of the cities quoted, are uninteresting and hostile: foreign voices and no lighting on one, cold and snow on the other. The stations are not used to introduce reminiscences or parallel erudite comments. They merely serve as props to re-set universal time, incidental, ill-defined spaces, apparently imperfect, which are neither exotic nor firmly standardized. The station is "outside and inside" the town (Sansot 1973, 85), but here, is it even part of the country to which it belongs? Sirkeci station in Istanbul, even though it is where the story starts, is not

[13] A comment made at the very beginning of the novel (p.8), when Hercule Poirot boards the Taurus Express in Aleppo bound for Constantinople (which makes up the first part of the novel). The Taurus Express, inaugurated in 1930, crossed Anatolia and linked Constantinople to Aleppo, where it branched into two, one line going to Damascus, the other to Baghdad.

even mentioned; it is just the departure point, and the departure itself is only indicated by the movement of the train along the platform: "There was a sudden jerk. Both men swung round to the window, looking out at the long, lighted platform as it slid slowly past them" (p. 20). A station is just a station; it can even be reduced to a platform. Ultimately, a country is concentrated into a city, which in turn becomes a station, summed up in a platform, which becomes a track. In other words, it is a synthesis of the entire space, masterfully reduced to a geometric outline. And yet, Agatha Christie's story is based on a remarkable journey, starting in Syria on a Sunday morning and finishing in Croatia (then Yugoslavia) the following Wednesday. In only four days, they travel a dizzying 2,000 kilometres (from Aleppo to Vincovci) through stations, towns, plains, mountains, straits, regions, frontiers, countries and even continents; explicitly a vast area, but only implicitly hinted at. *Murder on the Orient Express* has all the appeal and appearance of a travel novel, but it is far from being such, or at least, it does not provide any geographical account.

As observed by Guy Laflèche when analysing the novel as material for a narrative grammar: "The geography is that of crossword puzzles" (1999, 104). In fact, only nine places are named, but not described: six stations (Aleppo, Konya, two in Istanbul – one in Asia and one in Europe, Belgrade and Vincovci), a mountain range (the Taurus), a hotel (the Tokatlian in Pera), and "somewhere" (between Vincovci and Brod). The stations are simply mentioned as indications of place and time, setting the scene and providing a way of checking both the places along the route and the punctuality and progress of the train. The landscape is clearly there, but it is incomplete and the description is terse; it has no narrator and is inaudible and hence invisible. When it is beautiful, which only occurs once (the Taurus), we only learn about it indirectly, in a roundabout way, like a reflection in the glasses or eyes of the travellers: "Later they passed through the magnificent scenery of the Taurus. As they looked down towards the Cilician Gates, standing in the corridor side by side, a sigh came suddenly from the girl" (p. 12). The time frame is equally ill-defined; while the weather is constantly mentioned, notably the type, variation and intensity of the cold, there are few chronological pointers. Indeed, no date (year, month, general external information) is given or hinted at, while details of the day of the week, the time – down to the minute – constantly set the pace of the plot; a detailed account given with pointillist precision against a blurred background.

Summary of the places and times in *Murder on the Orient Express*

When? No date is given. Probably the **beginning of the 1930s**.
(Clues: the connection between the Taurus and the Orient Express taken by Hercule Poirot was created in 1930, and the novel was published in 1934.)
Season: **Winter**. It was very cold in Aleppo station, it was snowing in Belgrade, and the train was caught in snow in Croatia, for the first time of the season. With regard to the number of passengers, it was low season, and according to a director of the railway company, the train should have been half empty.
Timescale: The story unfolds over **4 days** (from the **departure** at 5 o'clock on Sunday morning to the **final stop**, at about 11 o'clock the following Wednesday night) and approximately **1,900 kilometres** from the point of departure, Aleppo in Syria, to where the train comes to a stop, somewhere between Vincovci and Brod in Croatia (890 km from Aleppo to Istanbul, 810 km from Istanbul to Belgrade, 150 km from Belgrade to Vincovci, 65 km from Vincovci to Brod).

On board the Taurus (approximately 38 hours and 890 kilometres)
– **Aleppo station**, departure, Sunday, 5 a.m.
– **Taurus Mountains**, Sunday, after lunch.
– **Konya station**, Sunday, about 11.30 p.m.
– **Haydarpasa terminal**, arrival in Istanbul (Asian shore), Monday, 7 p.m.

In Istanbul (approx. 2 hours)
On reaching Istanbul, Hercule Poirot crosses the **Bosphorus** by boat from Asia to Europe; on arrival at the Galata Bridge, he was driven to the **Tokatlian Hotel** in **Pera** (where Agatha Christie stayed, and which was destroyed in the 1950s).
– **Tokatlian Hotel**, Pera, Monday, between approx. 7.30 and 8.30 p.m.
– **Sirkeci station**, Istanbul (European shore), Monday, 9 p.m.

On board the Orient Express (about 50 hours and 1,000 kilometres)
– **Sirkeci station**, Istanbul, departure, Monday, 2 a.m.
– **Belgrade station** (where the coach from Athens was attached), arrival Tuesday 8.45 p.m., departure 9.15 p.m.
– **Vincovci station** (where the coach from Bucarest was attached), Wednesday, about 10 minutes after midnight.
– **Between Vincovci and Brod**, Wednesday from 12.30 a.m. until the dénouement, the evening of the same day (the end of the book). The train is snowbound. Had it not been delayed, it should have arrived in Brod at 12.58 a.m.
– **Lunch**, Wednesday midday.
– **Dinner**, Wednesday evening.
– **After dinner,** the travellers assemble in the **restaurant car** where Hercule Poirot draws his conclusions and where the novel ends.

3. Somewhere that is nowhere

This was not Agatha Christie's first railway crime novel, nor the last, but it is the only one in which the train is the actual murder setting. The drama occurs fairly early on, somewhere and/or sometime after Belgrade, in a nebulous area on the way to Europe. The train stops, trapped in the snow; and then the action unfolds. We know that time never stops; but we are less familiar with the fact that neither does space. However, the stopping of the Orient Express – sudden, unexpected and at night –makes it possible to simulate these joint impossibilities. First, the train stops at some ill-defined place in Croatia – "somewhere between Vincovci and Brod" – at a vague geographical point about 200 km west of Belgrade[14]. Standing irresolutely between two places that serve only as landmarks, the train is temporarily in what is clearly an incongruous no-man's-land, in a landscape that is also a negation, that no longer exists because it is nothing but a shapeless mass of snow, white on white, matter on matter. The space, previously drawn in, stretched out and narrowed by the track, is now resorbed, reduced to a shapeless and monochrome mass. Is not white the absence of colour, and cold a suspension of climate and the neutralization of the outside world? The combined effect is to dilute space and absorb time; all that is left is an over-abundance of snow. The snowdrifts are thus both an abstraction and a totality: the absence and neutralization of time and space. Ultimately, the snow becomes time and landscape. It folds itself around the train, like a wrap. The combination of this effect and the unforeseen events makes the Orient Express a complete socio-spatial-temporal object. The train stops suddenly, an event over which the protagonists have no control, but the action carries on and culminates in the murder act, which is a continuation of the movement and thus resembles "a suspension", to use dance terminology (Roux, 2007, 42). An unlikely plot, it is true, but above all, the actions and setting are in phase with the train, which is in a state of equilibrium and disequilibrium between two suspended worlds and two poles, one the impulse driving it from Istanbul station, and the other inexorably pulling it towards its final destination, even if the force of attraction is temporarily hampered by the proliferation of snowflakes.

[14] Vinkovci and Brod are towns in Croatia, 63 km apart, located respectively in the county of Vukovar-Srijem and in Slavonia. In relation to the route of the train, Vinkovci is 150 km from Belgrade going towards Zagreb.

It should be remembered that this murder is unusual in two ways: it is collective, each of the twelve assailants stabbing the victim, who turns out to have been a murderer himself, and the murder will remain unpunished because Hercule Poirot will not reveal the culprits. The Orient Express is also a determining factor of the unusual clemency and directions of the detective/upholder-of-the-law, breaking with his usual pursuit of reason, he too perhaps under the spell of the train. Can a deed carried out in a no-man's-land located in an area under oriental influence really be subject to a criminal court? In this case, can the law of retaliation, first mentioned in an engraving on the Hammurabi stele in Babylon, not prevail as the norm, and vendetta not be justified as a form of just vengeance?

4. Conclusion: There (easy) and back (difficult)

A straightforward outward journey, a complicated return; it is perhaps the train that invented, or at least formalized, a binary rhythm of travel, breaking it down into two separate journeys, with different directions and periods of time. Two starting points, polar opposites in a scalar sequence of events; two sequences materialized by the elastic movement and direction of the rebound: there and back. The return journey is essential, and any delays or disruptions are feared and dramatized. With great subtlety, Agatha Christie set her story explicitly in the context of the return journey. This defused and forestalled any excitement associated with travelling, preventing it from disturbing or interfering with her railway plot. The return is not a journey of discovery, and thus the meaning of the journey loses its interest and becomes dull, blunting the vividness of the landscape. Taking a journey means going somewhere, but what about coming back? The return is the finalisation of the journey.

> "Snow?"
> "But yes, Monsieur. Monsieur has not noticed? The train has stopped. We have run into a snowdrift. Heaven knows how long we shall be here. I remember once being snowed up for seven days."
> "Where are we?"
> "Between Vincovci and Brod."
> "Là là", said Poirot vexedly. (p. 31)

The murder - the ultimate crime, an expression of total social dysfunction, a symbol of cessation, of the end - is committed in the train, an object-movement whose purpose is to move ceaselessly, at a constant

speed, following a predetermined route along an indelible and unalterable track. The train in question is the supreme Orient Express, an additional vector of disorder, bearing the enchantment and the curse of the mysterious and threatening world conjured up by its name. Agatha Christie thus made the Orient Express a literary friction motor, as well as a composite object, a "mobile-stabile" like the works of Alexander Calder, both supported in space and suspended from another of its possible dimensions.

In a somewhere that looks like nowhere, in the Far East, at the limits of Europe, in a blurred zone, in the confinement of the train, the crime took place. That thriller promised an event (the murder) and a setting (The Orient Express), and the relation between the two. And the promise is kept: *Murder on the Orient Express* is indeed a geographical narrative and the literary illustration of particular situations of spatiality generated by the train, a mechanism that links fixity and movement.

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